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ABSTRACT

The more audiovisual expression becomes, the harder it is for the young to discover the virtues of reading and writing. Oral language alone is unable to sustain the kind of information that must be passed from generation to generation through transactional writing. From the student's point of view, the written language is essential to extended investigation. The impersonal written language of public expression, while it does not possess the immediacy of the spoken form, provides an essential neutrality and permanence. (KS)

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"ABOUT WRITING"

What is it writing can do that speaking can't? Each medium of expression overlaps with others; writing can do some of the things that speaking can do, but each medium also has its own unique and special virtues. It should be useful here to follow that line of thought, for bit by binary bit, the special virtues that only writing offers are being hidden. The electronic age has let youngsters believe that literacy is less important now than in grandpa's day. It may be only a passing deception, for the truth is that the audio-video age rests on mounds of paper, print, scripts, manuals, and invoices. But the more audio-video our acts of expression become, the harder it is for the young to discover and take pleasure in the special virtues of reading and writing.

I am concerned here with the unique power of the printed word and of writing modeled on print. That means I am not talking about the verbal arts--I think they can

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exist without books, did exist without them for tens of thousands of years. Story, drama and song are so profoundly basic to the human spirit, they will survive the next burning. If people survive.

Song is sturdy. Mere literacy, the foundation of electronic technology, is more fragile.

So, then, I am not talking about literature or its writing. I am talking about writing that does the work of a civilized world. In the terms of James Britton, this kind of writing is called transactional, the writing of a participant rather than a spectator.

> Transactional writing is intended to fit into, to articulate with, the ongoing activities of participants: poetic writing is a way of interrupting them - interrupting them by presenting an object to be contemplated in itself and for itself. Thus a piece of transactional writing - this present page for example - may elicit the statement of other views, of counter-arguments or corroborations or modifications, and is thus part of a chain of interactions between people. A response in kind - another piece of such writing - is always a potential of transactional writing. Poetic writing, on the other hand, demands a 'sharer,' an audience that does not interrupt . . . .
>
> This very broad distinction has an interesting corollary: what is contributed to the ongoing activity by a piece of transactional writing may well survive when the writing itself is forgotten. Thus, for example, Lindley Murray's English Grammar could be shown to have contributed ideas that are found in many succeeding grammars. It is in fact common practice for informative books to be brought up to date: over a period of years Kirk's Handbook of Physiology became Haliburton's, which in turn became McDowell's - and no doubt somebody else will substitute his name in due course. Can one imagine,

> on the other hand, Charles Dickens producing his version of Fielding's Tom Jones - to replace the original - and that in turn being rewritten by C. P. Snow?[1]

Books of transactional writing are not just kept, but they must be kept up. These are books meant to be modified, to be added to, to be built upon.

From these books we learn our professions and our technologies. Oral language alone is unable to sustain that kind of learning. Many of the subjects of a civilized culture do not exist in any substantial degree as an oral phenomenon. A logarithmic table (or a tax table, for that matter) does not exist orally.

But most importantly from a student's point of view, oral language alone is not the best way to study any but the most elementary subjects. This is especially true when the language of higher education is not native to you. And it is not native for most people. A totally monolingual educational system is not the norm; it never has been. Except for a highly privileged few, booklearning has always meant learning another, often totally different, language. And for students studying in a language not native to them, the book is a blessing.

A Japanese student in one of my classes last year made the point charmingly. I had asked her to comment on how

[1] James Britton, Language and Learning (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970) pp. 174-75. A handy Pelican paperback edition was published in 1972.

much more difficult it is to understand a lecture than a conversation in a newly learned language. She told the class how much she relied on texts and how much she had learned to appreciate those professors who chose texts well and used them thoroughly. She opened a book she had in front of her and in a small, but articulate gesture, she passed her hand over the opened book and explained, "The pages wait for me." They wait for every student. The pages wait.

Because our circles of love and solidarity are drawn primarily with talk, the oral language might appear, at first, more friendly and more personal than writing. But that first impression has failed to notice that circles of hate and barricades of privilege are also built with the sounds of language. Even within a social circle, the oral language can be intolerant and unforgiving. For once something has been said, aloud, in full awareness of another person, it can never really be unsaid. The oral language offers little shelter. Certainly not for the lonely, nor the stubbornly honest. It gives most of us away too quickly, too often.

But writing, because the page waits for you, can be a sheltering act. Words can be tried out in private, changed, never shown. And then you can carefully take out all those more socially shattering, risky, vulnerable exposures of

private feelings. You can make the words more impersonal. Written words are always very much your own and under your private control until you decide to let them go.

And that is a good thing, for part of the power of the impersonal standard language of public affairs and serious learning is precisely that it depends on neutral registers in which one's own private self is not, and should not be, the issue. When neither one's sex, nor geographical origin, nor age, nor even one's own current emotional state are at issue, All these sometimes distressing distractions can be screened out by the imposing formalities of public writing.

I think that many of our youngsters need to learn the power of the ultimate privacy of public, written language. For it is a language that both accomodates and shelters the private self. Standard public writing is like that marvelous, imposing old mansion at 104 Irving Street in Cambridge remembered with affection by E. E. Cummings as a place that kept public things public and private things joyously private. Writing modeled on the public language of print both accomodates and shelters the self exactly because it leaves the private self unexposed.

This kind of writing and its special powers can be friendly and sheltering, even (and perhaps especially) in those uses that seem at first formal and aloof. It is a lesson harder and harder to teach and difficult to learn

as the powers of literacy become more covert, hidden in miniature circuits and large cathode ray tubes.

What is happening now is that the foundation of literacy which supports our technology is growing less and less visible, less obvious to the young and to their community. It takes more work, more imagination to reach such youngsters, to let them learn how to participate in that hidden literacy. That is why all the tubes and wires and reels and all the Sesame Streets have made the writing teacher's job harder, not easier. Yet we must persist in our audio-video age to teach the young to keep up the bocks that must be kept up, if we are to maintain a decent, civilized technology.